

Original Article

Estimating Pragmatic Competence of EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension via Gricean Cooperative Principles

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Abstract

Understanding the pragmatic meanings of the utterances in exchanges is a serious challenge among English language learners. This study aimed to estimate the pragmatic competence of EFL learners' listening comprehension concerned with cooperative principles (CPs) of TOEFL candidates taking the listening modules. The maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner helped test takers uncover the indirect or figurative meanings of the speakers' intended meaning of utterances. The design of the study was exploratory-quantitative and interpretative. The participants were 150 high and low achievers of MA students majoring in TEFL. The research instrument was a 50-item listening test that was randomly selected from the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The participants took the listening test in the fall semester of 2022. Data from the listening test were collected and analyzed via *t*-test and ANOVA. Findings showed understanding CPs was effective in the learners' listening performance. Furthermore, results indicated high and low achievers' recognition of quantity and manner principles was significantly different. However, there was no such difference in learners' comprehension regarding the maxims of quality and relevance. Implications of the study suggest that EFL learners must focus more on the pragmatic meanings of quantity and manner rather than quality and relevance maxims.

Keywords: Gricean Maxims, Listening Comprehension, Pragmatic Meaning

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1. Introduction

Pragmatic meaning can be regarded as implied, indirect, intended, non-literal, or figurative meaning of the utterances in conversations (Çiftlikli & Demirel, 2022; Yule, 1996). Thus, in the present study, the pragmatic meaning was adopted to address the intended meaning that a listener implies during a conversation. The speakers' intention of speech in a specific context includes the interlocutors' role, rank, position, place, time, situation, etc. (Mirzaei et al., 2016). Among all discourse elements, context is a determining factor in understanding speakers' intentions. The non-literal meaning cannot be expressed through ordinary language since it can be understood if the speaker and listener share a common linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic knowledge (Loghmani *et al.*, 2019; Mulyadi et al., 2022; Rizaoglu & Yvuz, 2017). This knowledge is referred to as pragmatic competence and it is assumed to be shared by the people in a society (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The notion of the pragmatic meaning of utterances has always been disputable since the role of interpretation of the utterances cannot be ignored. The listener's meaning is different from the speaker's and the third person who infers another meaning. The degree of interpretation is aligned with the interlocutors' pragmatic knowledge (Fraser, 1996; Sahraee & Mamghani, 2012; Verschueren, 2016). Certainly, linguistic structures conveying fixed implied meaning do not always incite misunderstanding but they may cause miscommunication. Testing implied meaning is a part of the reading and listening sections of the TOEFL iBT. In the listening section, there are some short dialogues between two persons and one of them expresses an utterance with indirect meaning. Here, the conversation is said to convey "Implicature". In addition, the third person, the narrator, asks a question to elicit the pragmatic meaning. The speaker who produces the pragmatic meaning "implies" the nonliteral meaning but the listener who understands the indirect meaning "infers" the pragmatic meaning. The inference is the process through which implicature is calculated and understood (Darakhshan & Eslami Rasekh, 2016; Phillips, 2001; Yule, 1996). As TOEFL is a multiple-choice test, the task of understanding the indirect meaning is limited to four choices (i.e., one is the best choice, but not the correct, and the three distractors) as in the following example:

Man: Did Mr. Johnson plan to visit California and buy a house? I think he is not sure whether he can afford the loan for the contract.

Woman: He has not decided yet!

Narrator: What does the woman imply?

- a. If Mr. Johnson has got a loan, he can buy a house in California.
- b. Mr. Johnson has planned to visit California.
- c. She has addressed Mr. Johnson's loan.
- d. She means Mr. Johnson cannot buy the house in California.

The above item may be unclearly concerned with the principle of manner (i.e., avoid unclarity and ambiguity) since there are two decisions that Mr. Johnson must take including applying for a loan and buying a house in California. Thus, the stem can make unclarity. Moreover, the distractors of B, C, and D address a part of the two actions mentioned in the stem and make this item ambiguous. If A is selected, the process of inference is correct, otherwise, the listener has processed the indirect meaning inappropriately. In sum, the responses of B, C, and D could be correct to some extent; however, A is the best response. Here, the principle of manner is applied as the implied meaning of the woman's response is ambiguous to some extent and the test takers should discover the manner principle in selecting the best choice. Thus, the application of the manner maxim may help the listener to understand the implied meaning of the woman's speech.

The difference between the correct and incorrect choices is comparable to Grice's (1989) distinction between "what is said" and "what is implicated". Sahraee and Mamghani (2012) examined the reliability and validity of a listening test and concluded that the participants performed efficiently regarding their average score on each test. However, if each skill is considered separately and in detail, they scored the least in the listening section in comparison to other skills. In their study, listening competence has been compared only among Persian speakers. However, according to Khalili Sabet and Babaei (2017), as Persian learners of English are to communicate with other non-natives, their listening competence should be compared with non-Persian speakers so that the discrepancy in listening competence will be depicted. The difference is partly reflected in the statistics issued by the TOEFL institute (from 2002-3, 2005-6, 2009, 2015, 2016, 2022 to the present, according to which Persian speakers' rank ranges from 4th to 7th in the Middle East.

This lower score or rank may be due to the participants' lack of pragmatic knowledge or the design of questions. These questions with their special characteristics are highly likely difficult for Persian speakers who scored 50 or 60, a pass mark in MSRT (Allami & Aghajari, 2014). Although the volunteers have passed the test, they do not have pragmatic competence

yet. Perhaps, they have acquired the linguistic competence necessary for their academic activity but they are not pragmatically competent. Pragmatic knowledge helps the test takers to realize the intended meanings of the speakers' utterances regarding the mini-text of short dialogue or conversations (Taguchi, 2007c).

2. Literature Review

The studies of EFL learners' pragmatic competence have indicated that this area of investigation is at the preliminary stages (e.g., Haugh, 2002). The role of pragmatic competence in acquiring experiences to infer the implied meaning cannot be ignored (Ahmed, 2022; Saul, 2002). The process of comprehending the implied meaning in the target language can be related to EFL learners' interlanguage system developed by Selinker (1972) who discussed the role of interlanguage (IL) transfer in second language acquisition. It is believed that learners are following the steps to arrive at the target language and they may think in the first language while they learn the second language. This may affect their understanding of the implied meanings of the native speakers' utterances. Accordingly, interlanguage is a mediated language developed by the second language (L2) learners which maintains features of their first language (L1) and mapped them onto their speaking or writing performance. The learners may learn the target language rules and pass several stages to arrive at the target language. To arrive at the target pragmatic competence, the learners may overgeneralize some L2 writing and speaking structures. This may be seen among EFL learners who try to uncover the implied meaning through their L1 pragmatic competence. Since this system is different from the L1, the teacher should be aware of this mediated system and guide the learners to pass the process of learning and comprehending the implied meaning of the speaker's utterances. This system is pragmatically loaded and it is referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (Fraser, 1996). It is formed when the implied meanings in the mother language are positively or negatively transferred to the L2. When the learners are in contact with the L2 or native speakers, they face negative transfers that are tested and corrected and their pragmatic competence would develop; otherwise, they would be fossilized in the interlanguage system (Verschueren, 2016). In this case, they cannot infer the L2 implied meaning and rely on their L1 to comprehend the speakers' intended meanings (Allami & Aghajari., 2014; Babajani Azizi et al., 2020; Çiftlikli & Demirel, 2022).

To avoid listening errors and master the appropriate required pragmatic competence, it is necessary to analyze listeners' errors in understanding intended meanings so that their nature would be revealed (Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2018). Otherwise, they would remain and the process of fossilization occurs. Comprehending implied meanings would strengthen the candidates for international tests including TOEFL, especially listening and reading comprehension. In addition, a lack of pragmatic knowledge can affect the candidates' gains in these tests (Bach, 2006). In reviewing the literature of the study, the challenge is to provide the students in English courses with an awareness of implied meanings (Matsuoka, 2009).

Achieving pragmatic competence to comprehend the implied meanings of listening items can be one of the barriers that are experienced by Iranian learners (Babajani Azizi *et al*, 2020). Pragmatic competence courses are run in several universities in the world. For instance, it is offered at the university of Northwestern because medical students need to communicate appropriately with patients (Spring et al., 2000). Pragmatics is also offered as a three-credit course to major students of language at the Open University of Nigeria (Chiluwa & Ofulu, 2014). Regarding these, university officials have realized the importance of it. They have found out that understanding implied meaning is a great asset in helping students to realize complicated unexplained scientific subjects.

2. 1. Theoretical Framework

Pragmatic meaning is so vast that cannot be described in the field of semantics, and as a result, the following different theories include deixes, presupposition, discourse analysis, speech acts, implicature, etc. The theoretical assumption of this research is based on Grice's (1975) theory of CP which intends to formulate the implied meaning in daily conversation. This theory includes CPs of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance which should be followed to understand the indirect meaning of the utterances. Violation of any of these maxims may lead to the breakdown of the conversation. Therefore, they need to cooperate to explicate the cooperation and shared knowledge of the speaker and listener. There is a cooperation between interlocutors if they master a shared pragmatic competence. This is an essential condition to understand the nonliteral meanings. If the interlocutors are not from the same linguistic and cultural community or social and occupational class, they misinterpret each other and cannot convey their intentions. These principles are used to show

the types of conversational implicature. In sum, conversational implicature is at the nonliteral extreme and conventional implicature is at the literal one.

The role of CPs in helping the learners to arrive at the intended meanings of the speakers' implied meanings has not been fully examined in the literature of the study (Taguchi, 2013). Moreover, as it is generally believed, mastery at this level of language knowledge is even essential for ordinary people because pragmatic errors also happen among people of the same vernacular. As a result, the outcome is expected to be of paramount importance for those engaged in teaching and learning English. However, as Rizaoglu and Yavuz (2017) believe, there is not much research on pragmatic meaning as a sub-discipline of the second language (L2) acquisition and pragmatics. Regarding this point of view, the novelty of this study is to estimate the Iranian learners' engagement in inferring the implied meanings of speakers' utterances via CPs. It is necessary to enrich this field of study. The purpose of the research is to respond to research questions including:

RQ1. How do MA students apply Grice's CPs (i.e., quantity, quality, relevance, and manner) to infer the pragmatic meaning of listening items?

RQ2. What is the difference between high and low achievers' ability to apply Grice's cooperative principles (i.e., quantity, quality, relevance, and manner) and recognize the pragmatic meaning of listening items?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

The exploratory-quantitative and interpretative designs were utilized in gathering data on a listening test that included 50 selected items through a random sampling method from Educational Testing Service (ETS). The TOEFL mock test was modified after a process of a pilot study. The research objective was to explore the listeners' ability to recognize CPs. This study is also quantitative since the data have been gathered via an experimental research tool (Creswell, 2017).

3.2. Participants

The research population included 194 MA students majoring in TEFL at the Islamic Azad University of Ahwaz and Abadan, Iran. They accepted to participate in the study and filled in consent letters. They participated in an ETS listening test other than the target listening

test as a placement test. Then, 150 candidates who gained scores between -1 and +1 Standard Deviation (SD) were categorized into high and low achievers. The criterion for determining low achievers is -1 and for high achievers is +1 SD of the learners' mean scores. All were native Persian speakers including 85 (56.66%) females and 65 (43.33%) males. Their age ranged from 27 to 55 (Mean=32.11, SD=.98). In calculating the mean scores, ten participants were higher than 50 and excluded as outliers via the sorting method since they were extremely higher values of 50. They were in their second or third semester in the academic year of 2021-2 at the time of the administration of the listening test in the Fall semester of 2022. Regarding their responses to the test, 150 participants were assigned to equal groups of low and high achievers in the listening test.

3.3. Instrumentation

In this study, 150 listening items were collected from the website /www.ETS.org/ in the *TOEFL iBT Listening* section from 2015 to 2022. The items were categorized into four classifications based on Grice's CPs. Fifty items of short dialogues were randomly selected among the pool of listening items in the multiple-choice format. These items were selected through a systematic random sampling method and some modifications were made to design a TOEFL mock test of the listening module. Therefore, three types of constituency tests have been considered to endorse the test-retest reliability of listening, inter-rater reliability, and internal reliability. Fifteen MA students took the listening test twice in two weeks in a pilot study. The reliability of the test-retest was met ($r=.79$). In addition, inter-rater reliability was measured by Pearson Correlation Analysis as ($r=.83$) indicating the test had an acceptable reliability index. In the validation process, the content validity of the listening test was confirmed by two experts of TEFL. Their opinions about the implications of each item were considered and the four categories of maxims regarding the 50 items were formed for data collection after minor changes. For instance, the following excerpt displays the item that addresses the quality principle following Grice (1989):

Excerpt 1: Mom: John. Can you tell me what happened in the kitchen this morning?

John: Mary was in the kitchen.

Narrator: What does John imply?

a. I do not know.

b. Come back later.

c. I was out.

d. Ask Mary.

According to this talk exchange, Grice believed that John indirectly said D since if the mom asks Mary, she can realize the truth. Furthermore, this could be true because mom can check the truth and sees Mary. Distractors of A and C are literal and B is impossible and irrelevant. Therefore, John's response is clear in D which clarifies this point that if you need to know the happening, you should see Mary. Therefore, the pragmatic meaning includes some signal words that help the listener understand the meaning (Haugh, 2002; Saul, 2002; Wang, 2011).

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered via the listening comprehension test regarding Grice's CPs to categorize the listeners' abilities in selecting the best choice of each item. In the first phase, 50 short dialogues were selected from the pool of items. In these items, the narrator used signal words indicating one of the four maxims. In the second phase, these items were classified into four groups quantity (14 items), quality (12 items), manner (12 items), and relevance (12 items) based on their characteristics. To classify the dialogues, the criterion of calculability proposed by Grice (1989, p. 42) was used. Following Sadock (1978), Grice believes that calculability can be practically used in a test to distinguish the implied meaning in the conversation. This criterion is determined by the type of maxim (i.e., quantity, quality, manner, and relevance) employed to convey pragmatic meanings of the utterances in the dialogues. The basic assumptions of this criterion are as follows:

Principle 1. If the utterance conveys much less or more information than is required, the principle of quantity is violated.

Principle 2. If the utterance is not true or lacks evidence to support it, the principle of quality is violated.

Principle 3. If the utterance is unclear, vague, or ambiguous, the principle of manner is violated.

Principle 4. If the utterance is not referred to the topic of the exchange, the principle of relevance is violated.

In the third phase, after preparing the listening test, the participants took the listening test that lasted 50 minutes. The papers were checked and scored by the researchers to put in four maxims and two levels of high and low achievers' lists.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The normality of data assumptions was used to apply the research data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Thus, skewness and kurtosis analysis were used to test the normality of scores via SPSS, version 26. Findings of the listening scores representing the CPs were normally distributed around the standard deviation mean score (Mackey & Gass, 2016). As a result, parametric tests including *t*-test and ANOVA were employed to uncover differences between the high and low achievers' mean scores on the listening test (Cohen et al., 2017).

4. Results

4.1. High vs. Low Achievers

The results of the study attempted to describe the candidates' responses statistically and classify them regarding CPs. Data were categorized into two categories high and low and four maxims. The number of participants and their gains in each CP were displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.

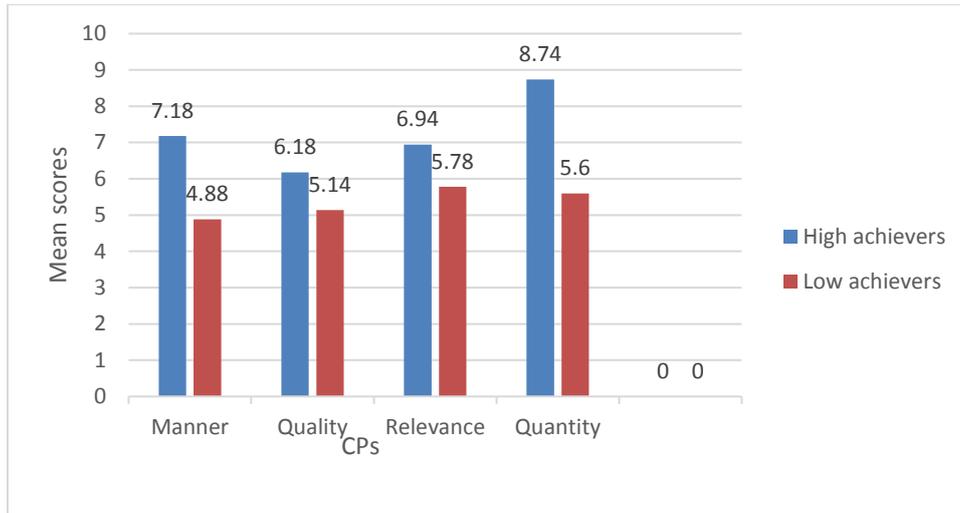
Descriptive Statistics of High (H) and Low (L) Achievers

Groups				Skewness		Kurtosis	
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Quantity (H)	75	8.74	2.06	.62	.277	.80	.548
Relevance (H)	75	6.94	1.06	.05	.277	.74	.548
Quality (H)	75	6.18	1.68	.11	.277	1.35	.548
Manner (H)	75	7.18	1.10	.10	.277	.88	.548
Quantity (L)	75	5.60	1.34	.82	.277	.25	.548
Relevance (L)	75	5.78	1.99	.37	.277	1.38	.548
Quality (L)	75	5.14	2.20	.90	.277	.95	.548
Manner (L)	75	4.88	1.92	.79	.277	.80	.548

As it is displayed in Table 1, high achievers' means are greater than low achievers' in four maxims. High achievers outperformed low achievers in the test. But inferential statistics can determine the difference at a significant level. To provide the reader with differences between high and low achievers, data are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Mean Scores of Listening Test



The analysis of the *t*-test measured the differences between high and low achievers' mean scores. Table 2 depicts high and low achievers' listening achievements in CPs.

Table 2.

High and Low Achievers' Listening Achievement in the Cooperative Principles

	High vs. Low (Mean)	Mean Difference	t	df	p
Quantity	8.74 vs. 5.60	3.14	5.17	148	.000
Quality	6.18 vs. 5.14	1.04	1.54	148	.124
Relevance	6.94 vs. 5.78	1.16	1.99	148	.065
Manner	7.18 vs. 4.88	2.30	3.99	148	.000

Table 2 indicates high and low achievers' difference in listening achievement regarding quantity and manner at the significant level while this significant level was not

achieved in the two groups' means of relevance and quality. The results of the table and an excerpt of each maxim are presented in the following subsections.

A *t*-test revealed low and high achievers responding items characterized by the Grice quantity principle for ($t=5.17, p=0.001<0.05$) with a significant difference. In other words, high achievers significantly outperformed low achievers in the application of the quantity principle. The *t*-test shows that there was not a significant difference between high and low achievers responding quality principle ($t=1.54, p=0.124>0.05$). In other words, high achievers significantly outperformed low achievers in the application of the quality principle. Findings indicated high and low achievers responding relevance principle were not significantly differed ($t=1.99, p=0.065>0.05$). Although high achievers gained a greater mean score than low achievers' both groups' mean scores could not be significantly different. The results of the *t*-test showed low and high achievers significantly differed in responding manner principle for ($t=3.99, p=0.001<0.05$). In other words, high achievers significantly outperformed low achievers in the application of the manner principle.

4.2. High and Low Achievers' Comparison

Mean differences between high and low achievers are one of the objectives of this study. Thus, the analysis of ANOVA was run to measure groups' performance in four categories of maxims in Table 3.

Table 3.

Between and Within Groups' One-way ANOVA (High and Low Achievers)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
High Achievers	Between Groups	266.49	3	88.83	7.23	.000
	Within Groups	3634.74	296	12.28		
Low Achievers	Between Groups	38.65	3	12.88	.85	.465
	Within Groups	4459.89	296	15.06		

Table 3 shows high achievers performed in the listening test and gained significant differences among CPs. However, no significant difference is seen among CPs of low achievers. Since the difference among the high achievers' use of CPs is significant, the post hoc Tukey test depicts the exact differences of means among the maxims of CPs in the high achievers' listening test.

Table 4.

Post-hoc Tukey Test of High Achievers' Cooperative Principles

(I) Principles	(J) Principles	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Quantity	Relevance	1.80*	.57	.010	.32	3.27
	Quality	2.60*	.57	.000	1.12	4.07
	Manner	1.56*	.57	.034	.08	3.03
Relevance	Manner	.24	.57	.975	1.71	1.23
Quality	Relevance	.80	.57	.502	2.27	.67
	Manner	1.04	.57	.267	2.51	.43

*. significance at the 0.05

Table 4 depicts high achievers' performance on the four principles. The test takers' mean score of quantity maxim and other maxims of relevance, quality, and manner is significantly different. Moreover, there is a significant difference between the relevance maxim and the quantity maxim. But there was not a significant difference between relevance and manner. In addition, a significant difference was not seen between quality and both relevance and manner.

5. Discussion

The first research question addressed the participants' application of Grice's CPs (i.e., quantity, quality, relevance, and manner) to infer the pragmatic meaning of listening items. Findings revealed participants applied CPs in inferring the non-literal meanings of the listening comprehension items differently. It was found that participants faced more difficulties in answering the items including quality and manner principles but they showed less difficulty in responding to quantity and relevance ones.

The second research question pointed to the difference between high and low achievers' ability to apply Grice's cooperative principles (i.e., quantity, quality, relevance, and manner) and recognize the pragmatic meaning of listening items. Results revealed that both groups were not adequately able to make a significant difference in relevance and manner and both groups need to focus more on learning the mechanisms of these two maxims. Low achievers needed to work on the four maxims, especially the quality and

manner maxims. But high achievers' major problems could be seen in quality and relevance. And low achievers' main difficulties were in quality and manner maxims. In a nutshell, quality was a major and shared difficulty of both groups and needed much concern. This may be due to contextual and cultural differences between Persian and English interlocutors. As a result, Iranian learners faced challenges to tackle with quality, relevance, manner, and quantity respectively. These maxims were discussed via given excerpts. Excerpt 2 shows the principle of quality:

Excerpt 2: Tom: I have lost my pen in the classroom. I thought you said that a pen was found and you gave it to the office.

Jack: Really, I am not quite sure.

Narrator: What does Jack imply?

- a. Jack does not believe Tom.
- b. Jack was not sure whose pen was.
- c. The pen was not Tom's.
- d. Jack forgets what he told Tom.

In the above dialogue, the participants should interpret the pragmatic meaning in Jack's pragmatic marker of really in her utterance and select choice D as the correct choice. This principle focused on true utterance and avoidance of false information. Any utterance lacking these two characteristics conveys reliable exchange. If there are elements signifying uncertainty or lack of information, for example, the utterance "I thought you said or I wonder" means someone is not sure of what is said. For instance, Tom tries to explain the situation in the second sentence to amend the quality of his previous information in excerpt 2. The function of Jack's utterance is to prove his utterance as a truth that can be regarded as a pragmatic marker. This result is in line with Fraser (1996) who notes that the utterance should be clear and not violate the quality maxim.

The results of the quality maxim are in line with Grice (1975) who distinguishes speakers' misunderstanding of the pragmatic meaning as rooted in the markers that make a lack of confidence or uncertainty among the interlocutors. Both high and low achievers gain low scores in the quality maxim. As a result, Iranian learners faced difficulty to answer these items.

The second area of difficulty in learners' performance is the maxim of relevance. The principle of relation in the foreign language is problematic, especially among the low

achievers since there is not a clear relationship between the utterances of the interlocutors. In other words, the relations between the topic of conversation may be lost. Excerpt 3 shows the violations of the relevance maxim:

Excerpt 3. The driver: I was in a hurry and couldn't see the red light.

The police officer: No wonder you couldn't see the red light! Your driving license tells me the fact.

Narrator: What does police officer mean?

- a. The police officer checked his driving license.
- b. The driver did not pay attention to the red light as he was in a hurry.
- c. The driver is permitted to drive the car when he uses glasses.
- d. The driver did not have a driving license.

Excerpt 3 indicates the utterances "No wonder you couldn't see the red light! Your driving license tells me the fact." are not relevant to the driver's utterance of "I was in a hurry and couldn't see the red light". The responder must choose between C and D while the best choice is C and the other choices are distractors. The other problem is the relationship between the police officer's utterances and choice C since the police officer makes a dilemma in his utterances, especially the pragmatic marker "No wonder". This may be the reason why two groups of high and low achievers have difficulty answering this item properly.

The results concerned with the maxim of relevance agree with Taguchi (2002b) who believes the man in the above excerpt would agree with the woman since he has accepted the woman's speech. However, "No wonder" may not always signify acceptance. The principle of relevance was moderately difficult among the high and low achievers since they had problems in realizing shared topics between the interlocutors. Shared knowledge may remove this problem as Taguchi (2013) believes that the listener considers linguistic knowledge and contextual information to understand the relevance between the topics. However, it took a long time to master the culture-based relevance maxim. Rizaglu and Yavers (2017) found the relevance maxim as the simplest one among low achievers; however, the results of this study showed it is moderately simple.

The third area of difficulty addresses the maxim of manner. Persian speakers learning English can recognize the principle of the manner in the foreign language with difficulty, especially among low achievers. In the following excerpt, the principle of manner has been violated because of the idioms in the two speakers' utterances.

Excerpt 4. Man: Where is the nearest post office?

Woman: It must not be too far from here.

Narrator: What does the woman imply?

- a. The post office may be near.
- b. She is not sure how to get to the post office.
- c. She knows the post office address.
- d. She does not know the address.

Since the principle of manner is violated with the use of the above excerpt, some of the participants have not realized the pragmatic meaning of them. Here, the auxiliary “must” in the woman's utterance signifies that the dialogue conveys an implied meaning Taguchi (2013) mentions that nonliteral and literal meanings are two extremes of the meaning and the listener must move in between the two sides to get the pragmatic meaning. This shows the violation of the manner principle that makes it difficult for Persian speakers. This may be due to the pragmatic using auxiliary verbs like should, may, can, and must that convey different meanings in the learners' L1. In other words, the woman violates the manner because she is not sure she used the word “must”. However, she is not sure that the man can get the address. This maxim emphasizes clarity in speech (Grice, 1975). This is in line with Wee and Winnie (2009) who believe word selection, attitude and facial expression can violate the manner maxim. Figurative, idiomatic, and metaphorical language may make dialogues unclear. Excerpt 5 the use of the idiom "screen the water" in the man's utterance makes the item difficult.

Excerpt 5: Woman: What do you think about my progress in learning English?

Man: I am not sure if I am telling the truth but I think it is screening the water.

Narrator: What does the man mean?

- a. He means the woman has not progressed anymore in learning English.
- b. What he said to the woman was true because he is not sure.
- c. The woman learns how to talk but has an inappropriate accent.
- d. He does not believe in what he said to the woman.

The fourth area of difficulty could be the understanding quantity maxim which is simple to some extent between high and low achievers. Grice (1975) refers to the violation of this maxim when there is more or little information given in the utterance. Regarding excerpt 6, the man's utterance is conveyed by giving more information. The word “well”, for

example, conventionally signifies the speaker does not agree with the opinion of the speaker's utterance and the word "but" signifies two different ideas. These two indicators coincide in an utterance to give more information and violate the quantity principle. For example:

Excerpt 6: Woman: When is the final exam of the writing course?

Man: Well, the English teacher is very busy nowadays and tries to provide us with a schedule. As I know him, he is unable to plan it until at least the near future,

Narrator: What does the man imply about the final exam?

- a. The English teacher is usually unexpected.
- b. The teacher cannot plan the final exam.
- c. The exam is planned for after November.
- d. The teacher is very disciplined.

Here, the man's utterance conveys the pragmatic meaning that could be understood if the whole mini-text context come into consideration. If the listener chooses choice A, the pragmatic meaning may be understood. The distractors are the actions that are followed the choice A. The man's utterance is given the required information in the first sentence and the rest could be redundant. Thus, this item violates the principle of quantity. Extra information may make the problem of confusion among the learners or at least mislead them. This can be as harmful as the lack of required information.

In the above excerpts, the ideal speaker is a native speaker of the English language. The main problem concerned with low achievers is cultural and contextual awareness that affects their understanding of the speakers' indirect meaning. Cultural, contextual, and pragmatic aspects of language could be the main challenges of Persian speakers who take a listening test that include pragmatic meanings. This conclusion is matched with several studies (e.g., Allami & Aghajari, 2014; Babajani Azizi et al., 2020; Darakhshan & Eslami Rasekh, 2016; Khalili Sabet & Babaei, 2017; Loghmani et al., 2019; Mirzaei et al., 2016; Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2018). This could be worse if the dialogues happen in an academic context since Persian learners may commit pragmatic errors in a non-academic context. In addition, they may not realize the difference between these two contexts. The solution of this problem may be solved if the teachers focus on the four maxims and their application in both contexts. They may teach the learners how they can infer the pragmatic meaning corresponding to CPs in various contexts. Furthermore, they need to teach the learners how

to observe the CPs and avoid violating the maxims. Test designers should be careful to follow the above considerations and design conversations regarding appropriate stems and choices. These considerations are matched with the ideas proposed by Taguchi, (2002b, 2005a, 2007c, 2011). Following Wang (2011), since the best choice is considered in such items rather than the correct choice, the teachers and test designers must take this into account.

The main problem that can affect learners' performance is the concepts of "infer and imply". The complexity of the distinction between these two causes even native speakers to use them interchangeably. The "implied", in the stem, motivate the listener to pay attention to what is intended in the heard utterance whereas the "inferred" motivate the listener to seek her/his pragmatic knowledge to choose the best choice. The final problematic issue is the distinction between "the best and the correct response". Learners should know the best answer means there may be possible answers related to the stem but the correct answer means there is not any possible answer. Thus, both teachers and test designers should prepare a clear contextualized item as to what happens in a real conversation to signal the pragmatic meaning to the listeners.

There is a need to help Persian speakers acquire L2 pragmatic competence and infer metaphorical meanings of the utterances. The results of the study indicate that low achievers are weak in all CPs and need adequate instruction in pragmatic strategies. Both groups were significantly different in dealing with maxims of quantity and manner but they were not significantly different in both relevance and quality. This shows that both groups need appropriate instruction in dealing with both relevance and quality maxims. The major contribution of this study is to propose a hierarchy of difficulty including quality, relevance, manner, and quantity in learning the CPs. But the priority of learning quality maxim could be regarded in both high and low achievers. In addition, the dichotomy of "the best and the correct choices" and "infer and imply" should be taught since it may be used interchangeably among the learners. These mistakes are identified and analyzed in the study and it is concluded that the learners' recognition of these terms helps them overcome pragmatic miscommunications. This is proposed by Matsuoka (2009) who believes in the role of pragmatic markers in comprehending the invocations' intended meanings in the context.

6. Conclusion

In the current study, TOEFL iBT candidates listened to short conversations, and data were analyzed to estimate high and low achievers' difficulties in the TOEFL listening test. Results showed the origin of listening comprehension difficulty in understanding implied meaning in short dialogues. Thus, candidates' pragmatic competence concerned with Gricean maxims may help them boost their listening abilities. Moreover, this study clarified the "implied" meanings as the source of difficulty among the Iranian TOEFL iBT candidates during listening to short conversations.

In a comparative study, high and low achievers' responses were analyzed addressing protentional challenges of the listening test. Among Grice's cooperative principles, quality is considered a highly difficult principle in both groups. In sum, quality and manner among low achievers and quality and relevance among high achievers are difficult. However, relevance and quantity in low achievers and quantity and manner are simple. It should be noted that low achievers could not make any significant difference among the means of the principles while high achievers could achieve it. This shows that high and low achievers performed better on the quantity principle rather than the quality principle to uncover the implied meaning of the speakers.

The short dialogues characterized by the principles of quality (for high achievers), manner (for low achievers), quantity (for high achievers), and relation (for low achievers) are ranged from difficult to easy in a hierarchical order. However, the context of the conversations, the role, and the rank of the interlocutors may affect the simplicity or difficulty level of the items. Thus, the pedagogical implications of the study address the priority of teaching CPs and the underlying basis of maxims that help the learners realize the intended meanings of the utterances. Teachers should teach the implicatures used in the short talk exchanges representing Grice's quality and relevance maxims since the high and low achievers' mean scores were not significantly different.

The study faced a few limitations addressing the small sample size of the high and low achievers and the case of gender that remained intact. The other limitation was the various views of the experts on the recognition of the type of maxim and putting it in the relevant category. This needs much care since this can affect the results of current studies. In future research, learners with more than two levels of language proficiency and a greater size could participate in the same study. The participant's gender and level of proficiency

were not regarded as a variable of the study; therefore, these variables can be regarded as independent variables in future studies.

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